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ABSTRACT

The role and purposes of historical research in the study of higher education are considered, and essential processes in employing historical methodology are identified. An historical study underway of Native American tribally controlled community colleges heavily utilizing primary sources is cited as a case in point of how lessons learned from historical analysis can possibly be used in the future development and modification of policies. It is noted that historical research can illuminate current problems and act as a tempering influence. There is a need for historical research to produce a faithful record of events. There is need also for historical research aimed at suggesting, through a study of previous events, generalizations for guiding behavior. Three essential processes in using historical methodology are: data collection from documentary primary and secondary sources; criticism of data through assessing the genuineness of information sources; and the presentation of information in accurate and readable form. Much more use of historical analyses is recommended to supplant studies using descriptive research approaches. A bibliography of previous related research is included. Included are 10 references. (SW)

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The Role of Historical Research in Higher Education

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This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education held at the Sheraton Inner Harbor Hotel in Baltimore, Maryland, November 21-24, 1987. This paper was reviewed by ASHE and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC collection of ASHE conference papers.

Abstract

The role and purposes of historical research in the study of higher education are discussed. Essential processes in employing historical methodology are briefly identified. An historical study underway of Native American tribally controlled community colleges heavily utilizing primary sources was cited as a case-in-point of how lessons learned from historical analysis can possibly be used in the future development and modification of policies. A bibliography of previous related research is included.

The Role of Historical Research in Higher Education

In this presentation it is not my intent to focus upon the intricacies of historical methodology or research procedures, although I will allude to them in broad stroke fashion. The focus will be on the role of historical research in relation to other types of research, and on some of the major contributions historical type research can make in studying higher education.

There are perhaps too few research efforts in higher education designed to assist persons concerned with current problems and issues to profit from experiences of the past. Due to the cyclic nature of the evolutionary process by which mans' ideas about education appear and reappear, the functional purposes of historical research should receive more emphasis than they do, so that, when events have completed the 360 degree journey, greater wisdom can be interjected into the problem solving activity. For example, a study of the evolution of teacher education in the United States and the thinking of great leaders associated with the movements may contribute to a more insightful understanding of contemporary problems in that arena of higher education.

Purposes of Historical Research

Many times the sole but legitimate purpose of historical research has been to produce a faithful record of events as they occurred. There are instances where a series of historical studies can lead through critical analysis and interpretation to fruitful generalizations that may serve as controls for present and future behavior. An example might be, for a given type of college or university, that from a series of institutional histories, generalizations could be derived which would impact future planning efforts and lines of action taken. A useful and concrete application of the principles of historical research can be found in legal type research, such as, case law, constitutional provisions, and statutory enactments, regarding the legal rights and privileges of students and efforts of colleges and universities to control their lives. At certain points in time a thorough bibliographical survey and synthesis of earlier studies in a specific field accompanied by critical analysis and interpretation may be an appropriate and legitimate functional application of the principles of historical research.

A major value of historical research in higher education as well as in all aspects of the educational endeavor is to aid in the detection and understanding of fads and frills. Historical research can throw light on current problems and act as a tempering influence on ingrained prejudices. The author has been amazed that emphasis during recent years on "education for each," "accent on learning," and "individualized instruction" are thought by some to be new ideas. Usually discourse reveals the conversationalist to be oblivious to the plethora and variety of plans which existed during the 1930s and early 1940s for accomplishing those worthy goals.

It is through history that any true sense of progress is generated. Unless one can accurately describe what conditions precede the contemporary, there is no valid basis on which to judge either the nature of contemporary events or change as improvement. There is need for historical research the purpose of which is only to produce a faithful record of events. There is need also for historical research, aimed at suggesting, through a study of previous events, generalizations for guiding behavior. Sometimes a combination of purposes may motivate the research effort. A flaw in many descriptive and inferential studies is that no true

accounting is taken into account of the progression of events as a context within which those types of studies are conducted and results interpreted. A genuine understanding of contemporary problems must rely on historical antecedents.

Nature of Historical Research

Regardless of the purpose to be accomplished by historical research in higher education, there are three major essential processes necessary. They will be mentioned briefly without elaboration to identify essential features of this type of research. They are the collection of data from documentary primary and secondary sources using systematic bibliographical and data recording procedures, criticism of data through assessing the genuiness of information sources and the trustworthiness of information revealed, sometimes employing the process of triangulation, and the presentation of information in coherent, accurate, and readable form. The process of writing is a difficult one involving problems of organization, documentation, and interpretation. A major problem is determining the relative importance of various informational items so that details are not permitted to crowd out main events and interesting side excursions are not allowed to deter

from the main stream of historical narrative. The clarity with which an investigator defines at the outset the problem to be solved by an historical study approach will be related to the investigators' ability to judge relevance of facts uncovered and the relative importance and significance of various topics.

A Case in Point

An historical study in progress at Washington State University on which proper technical procedures and processes were employed can be used as a case-in-point to describe briefly the possible value of one study (Stein, 1987). Tribally Controlled Community Colleges (TCCCs), chartered and controlled by a federally recognized American Indian tribe, have been in existence since the founding of Navajo Community College in 1969. By 1987, there were twenty colleges of that type. Except for a small number of journal articles and dissertations (House 1974; LaPointe, 1977; Wicks, 1979; Isaac, 1980; Shanley, 1980; LeBeau, 1980; Haymond, 1982; McDonald, 1982; Horse, 1982) little is known about Indian tribally controlled colleges. No research existed about the forces and factors leading to the inception and development of this group of colleges. The current study was designed for the purpose of producing a faithful and

accurate record of events leading to the establishment and development of TCCCs during the years 1968 to 1978.

The major question was: What is the history of the Tribally Controlled Community Colleges? The investigator developed 28 subsidiary research questions related to origin, establishment, and legitimacy. These questions ranged from those about why the tribes felt the need to develop their own higher education institution to how the philosophy and mission of the colleges was decided, including the decision to use the community college format. Questions ranged also from where the college got its resources to begin operation to the role played by the tribal government.

Scope of the Study

The major focus of the study was upon the first six tribally controlled community colleges established beginning in 1968 whose existence was of such duration as to allow them to have a history. Other different types of institutions which have major Indian control or participation such as Haskell Indian Junior College and each of three Indian technical institutes in the United States were considered insofar as roles they played in the Tribally Controlled Community College movement. Also examined were two tribally controlled community colleges

established during the period that failed, Ganado Community College and Innupiet University of the North.

Data Sources

Sources of data included interviews with informants (the actors) involved on each reservation, former and present administrators (both lay and professional), and documentary evidence. Major sources of the latter were the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC) office files, College Board of Trustees' minutes and other college documents, the Congressional Record, records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, newspaper stories and editorials, and professional journal articles written by administrators.

Possible Outcomes

In the long illustrious history of higher education, the Tribally Controlled Community Colleges seem to be succeeding in the Native American populations where even the most prestigious universities have failed previously. Larger numbers and proportions of Native Americans than ever before are entering and succeeding in collegiate education. If the ingredients of this success can be identified through an historical study and the information shared with the rest of the higher education community, perhaps a new more effective theory of

educating Native American and possibly other minority students can be developed. Once developed and refined, the lessons learned may be transportable to other tribal groups and to newly established tribal colleges. Lessons may help four-year colleges and universities to better educate entering freshmen and transfer Indian students. Findings may conceivably lead to modifications in governmental policies relating to Indian collegiate level education. As of this date it is not possible to discern how much promise for the future may evolve from an accurate record of past experience regarding Indian college education.

Conclusions

In the serious study of higher education, much more use of historical analyses is strongly encouraged to supplant studies using descriptive research approaches of which there is an over abundance.

The use of historical methods and processes to study higher education seem to be eclipsed by a growing breed of researchers who act as if the only research of value is that conducted in the context of a theoretical framework. It is possible that some of the sacred theoretical frameworks could be greatly improved and

modified through the application of an inductive approach which is afforded through scholarly historical analyses. There seem to be an absence of enough scholarly studies in higher education utilizing the historical approach for one or more of the purposes mentioned above. The role of historical research in the study of higher education and the importance of it in helping scholars and practitioners keep an insightful perspective needs to gain greater prominence.

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